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# The Sussex Research Hive: providing peer-led support for doctoral researchers

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There has been a trend in recent years for academic libraries to alter the balance of their space in response to concerns about the fall in researchers' visits to the library building, and the view amongst researchers that the library has become an undergraduate space. Several institutions have introduced dedicated areas for their research staff and students, providing a variety of study spaces and facilities. At the University of Sussex we saw this as an opportunity to create more than just a space for researchers, and to use it build a closer relationship with our research community.

## THE SUSSEX RESEARCH HIVE AND THE HIVE SCHOLARS

The Sussex Research Hive<sup>1</sup> opened in October 2010. Part of a major refurbishment of the University Library, it was designed as a much-needed dedicated space for the researcher community at Sussex. It consists of standard desk spaces, comfortable sofas and some bookable meeting rooms. The Hive forms part of the wider support the library provides for researchers, which includes an annual seminar series, events during Open Access week and individual and group training for researchers. The Hive is supported by the academic publisher SAGE, who have made a gift to support this programme.

We were keen that the Hive should be a success from the start. This was the first time we had restricted access to a part of our busy library, and with a high demand for undergraduate space,

we could not have our researcher space sitting unused. To help us publicise and promote the Hive to the community and to bring people into the space we set up our Research Hive Scholar scheme, funded by our SAGE gift. Our idea for staffing the area came from our visit to the Research Exchange at the University of Warwick,<sup>2</sup> which employs a number of Research Exchange Advisors.

In liaison with our Doctoral School we developed three scholarships to be awarded to members of the doctoral community; these are intended to bridge the gap between the library and the wider research community at Sussex, to develop and evaluate the Research Hive as a physical space and to provide peer support to other doctoral researchers through events and advice. The scholarships are designed as an opportunity for the holders to develop their own skills in a range of activities, including delivering presentations, organising events and social media and getting to know more about academic publishing. Each annual scholarship is awarded after a competitive process, and is worth £3000; in return we ask our scholars to commit an average of six hours per week to supporting the Hive.

#### **HOW THE SCHOLARS WORK**

We were interested to see how the Hive, as a completely new initiative, was used, and how the role of the scholars developed. Each scholar worked a two-hour shift in the Hive so as to be on hand to provide assistance and advice, as well as to evaluate how the area was used. In addition they spent time building relationships with some of the key contacts in the research community: academics and support staff in departments and schools who were also involved in supporting researchers, the Students Union and the Careers Service.

The emphasis on the scholars' role in the first year was to work with us to promote the Research Hive and encourage researchers to use the space. We had a widely publicised welcome event, followed by a series of informal peer-led discussions on issues of concern to doctoral students such as thesis-writing and teaching. These were relaxed, information-sharing sessions. In the second year the scholars facilitated peer-to-peer discussion sessions following the library's more formal Hive Seminar Series. These sessions build on topics discussed at the seminars, including copyright, REF and the changing research environment. This approach was based on focus-group feedback from doctoral researchers and Hive users.

A number of larger events have been held in the Hive, including workshops from the academic and professional publisher SAGE on how to get published; these also give researchers from across a number of disciplines an opportunity to meet over lunch beforehand.

Many researchers at Sussex do not come onto campus on a regular basis: they are studying for one of our professional doctorates, or are researching part time. Engaging with these difficult-to-reach parts of our community was important, and some of the scholars' shifts in the Hive were timetabled at weekends and in the evenings when these groups were more likely to visit. Scholars also reached out beyond the physical space of the Research Hive to establish a virtual community by setting up a blog and Twitter feed and making regular contributions to the Doctoral School blog. Since its opening, we have worked hard with the scholars to evaluate the usage of the Hive and to demonstrate its value. Entry statistics have been kept, along with qualitative evaluations on how the space is being used by researchers. The Hive Scholars have also held regular focus groups with users, carried out online surveys of the research community and presented progress reports to the university's Doctoral School committee.

#### **BENEFITS FOR SCHOLARS**

The scholarships themselves offer a valuable development opportunity for the holders as they are regarded with a certain amount of prestige amongst the doctoral community, and competition for the three places is growing year on year.

As well as producing promotional materials and organising events, the scholars have had the opportunity to learn more about the higher education research community and academic publishing; they benefited from the library's relationship with SAGE when they visited the publisher's London office to speak about their research and the issues they face as doctoral students. Our relationship with SAGE has led to opportunities to present jointly with library staff at a CPD25 library staff development event in London, and to participate in an international colloquium on library spaces in Basel. One set of scholars also published an article on the challenges of doctoral research in the national press.<sup>3</sup>

The scholars have, however, faced a number of challenges. Although the Hive was designed primarily as a space for collaboration, it very quickly became apparent that many researchers preferred

to use it as a quiet space, and were not receptive to a new culture being imposed upon them. A silent community was establishing itself, which although it was not what we had first envisaged, was still a form of collaboration and cooperation that we had aimed to foster:

Finding an area where I could write in silence was the main motivation behind coming here [to the Hive]. But, gradually, I realised that seeing the same faces every day felt nice in terms of feeling some sort of solidarity with other people. Because it is very lonely, the work of a researcher.

(Sussex Research Hive user)

The challenge for the scholars was to accommodate the needs of the various user groups and so a compromise was reached that the two study rooms should be used for noisier purposes, and that the large study space would only occasionally be used for large events, and at times clearly advertised to the Hive community. There have also been conflicting priorities between the needs of the library and the community: for example, requests for a coffee machine in a library in which food and drink is strictly not allowed.

An additional challenge has been that while each of the scholars brings a new set of strengths and personal agendas, we need to try to harmonise these with our own library priorities. As it is important that the scholars are able to work effectively as a team from the very start, in order to speed up the usual gradual process of teambuilding we have tried to provide a supportive induction process before setting them to work straight away on their welcome event for new doctoral students.

#### **BENEFITS FOR THE LIBRARY**

The benefits of the Research Hive Scholars for the library are huge. Researchers are a user group who can sometimes be difficult for libraries to connect with, but our scholars provide us with a valuable link to that community. The use of doctoral students as intermediaries takes away the 'them and us' feeling that we all sometimes face as librarians when engaging with users and that researchers may well experience when using our services. We are able to learn from the scholars what are the most important issues facing doctoral researchers and to design our training and support around their needs. The scholars have also brought us closer working relationships with others around campus who support research – the

Doctoral School, Careers, Researcher Development – and have allowed us to integrate our training provision more closely with theirs.

There is no doubt that the scholars have been successful in promoting the Hive. Over 30% of the university's doctoral students across all subjects had used the space in the first nine months since opening, and feedback has been very positive; these are examples:

Its existence shows the university is valuing the research of its doctoral students.

I've met so many fellow students I wouldn't have otherwise.

The Hive is a popular space for researchers from across the disciplines; as expected, it is particularly so for those in the humanities and social sciences, and less so for lab-based researchers. We have also noticed greater usage from departments that have recently removed office spaces for postgraduate researchers; these data are being collected by the Doctoral School to address this problem in the university more generally.

#### **THE FUTURE**

The Hive and its scholarships are constantly developing and evolving. We have already made several small changes to the physical area based on user feedback, and each year a new set of scholars learns from the experience of the previous years. Over the last year, the scholars were able to develop a good working relationship with the Students' Union and held a successful joint surgery in the Hive – this is something we are keen to build upon in future. We are gradually learning what does and does not work in the space, though of course the needs of our community are always changing.

Other priorities are to build a closer relationship with researchers from the sciences by identifying what the Hive is able to offer them, and we are planning to benefit from the expertise of the Marketing Team at SAGE to help us with this.

The scholars provide an invaluable link between the library and its community, and the next stage is to share the benefits of that link with other units on campus? Our researcher development unit is currently setting up a series of online modules with integrated peer discussion forums to support much of its face-to-face training provision. The scholars will be instrumental as champions

in setting up and ensuring the growth of this new community of practice.

Two years since its launch, the Research Hive has its own clear identity and is a valued part of the research community at Sussex. In the words of one of our scholars:

The Hive is a unique space in the university as it is a home for an eclectic community of scientists, anthropologists, engineers and creative writers and more. One thing I learnt as a [Hive] Scholar is that at times all doctoral researchers get nervous, doubtful, confused, frustrated and scared, so whether as Scholars we organise a seminar on writing a thesis or just have a drink of tea/beer with our peers, we can be the voice of encouragement, information, support and hopefully laughter. As Scholars we can and do make a difference.

#### **REFERENCES**

- 1 <http://www.sussex.ac.uk/library/staff/research/hive>
- 2 <http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/services/library/researchexchange/>
- 3 <http://www.guardian.co.uk/higher-education-network/blog/2011/aug/08/make-doctoral-researchers-better-collaborators>